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ABSTRACT

Schools are becoming increasingly violent places. This workshop presentation examines ways to improve counselor facilities and to enhance work safety. Client populations for school counselors have changed significantly in recent times as school administrators refer more welfare related problems for help. Although violent attacks on counselors may be rare, incidents of worrying phone calls, fear of attack, sexual harassment, and defamation can erode counselors' health. Numerous factors figure in the development of effective and safe counseling services in the school. Security should be carefully thought out, including the safekeeping of records and personal protection. Since privacy is a key aspect of counseling, clients should be seen in a private room, free of distractions. But counselors must also exercise care in working alone, since this situation creates a high risk set of hazards. Counselor and client stress may be reduced by making careful changes to the surroundings. A reception center can help identify agitated clients and a carefully designed office can facilitate both safety and relaxation. It is recommended that counselors have access to professional supervision, be given time for networking with other professionals, be able to assess risk, and be knowledgeable about worker compensation claims. (Contains 12 references.) (RJM)

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"How Safe Are You at Work? Occupational Health and Safety Issues for School Counsellors."

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In presenting this workshop, I wish to look at ways of improving counsellor facilities and issues affecting work safety.

How many counsellors work in cramped noisy offices with little secretarial support or privacy?

What can be done to improve client flow management to improve worksafe practices?

Because of legal actions and privacy clauses, it is very difficult to gain a full picture of incidents in counselling. Under reporting gives a false impression of just how serious workplace risks exist in a counselling practice.

From my twenty one years work as a school counsellor, I have had contact with counsellors who have been assaulted, injured, threatened, falsely accused, harassed, investigated, retired through health problems - all associated with their work in schools.

The idea of being killed, or assaulted at work, is not a pleasant one. To employees it brings shock, horror, disbelief and fear. To employers, responsibility and claims for compensation, yet the probability of a counsellor being hurt or injured at work is real.

Client populations for school counsellors have changed significantly in recent times as many more welfare related problems are referred for help, mainly from school administrators. Counsellors working with victims of domestic violence recognise the potential explosiveness of these cases. Shootings, sieges, bomb threats as a result of domestic disputes outside school are reported regularly in the media.

In Queensland, since the introduction of the Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act on 21 August 1989, up to June 1993 a total of 23 690 applications have been heard in Queensland courts. In addition, there were 1163 applications for revocations or variations to existing orders.

Over this same period, 11 394 Temporary Protection Orders and 16 349 Protection Orders have been granted.[1]

Of course, these are the cases where matters have become so serious as to reach court and counsellors would be aware violence in the community is much more frequent whether it be domestic, "youth on youth" or general criminal assaults.

Besides dealing with victims of violence, schools themselves can be violent places.

Adelaide 1992:

- Two students at Banksia Park High School were shot and wounded by a Year 9 student during a three-hour siege[2]

Melbourne 1992:

- The Deputy Principal of Northcote High School and two students were bashed when they confronted 40 rampaging youths who had come into the school grounds looking for another student

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[1] Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs Statistical Services Branch

[2] *Are Schools Battlegrounds?* Geoff Maslin Ed. Alternative Dec 1993

Coffs Harbour 1991:

- Two teachers and a student were shot by a 13 year old who had been sent home for misbehaviour and later returned with a gun

Southport 1994:

- A Southport High teacher was seriously injured by a bomb blast set by a student

A survey of teachers[3] in 246 schools in W.A. showed 1364 cases of physical assault were reported, 5 of those were severe, causing the teacher to take time off work, and 363 of those assaults caused the victim physical pain.

In addition, there were 610 cases of damage to teachers' personal property.

Star[4] refers to a survey of psychotherapists on patient violence toward them.

A group of 422 respondents, including psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, and marriage, family and child counsellors reported that

- 14 per cent had been assaulted
- 35 per cent had been threatened
- 61 per cent had at some time, felt physically afraid of one or more of their patients

Hands and feet were the weapons most used by patients. When external weapons were used, they tended to be office objects such as chairs, telephones, ashtrays. To a much lesser extent, knives or guns were used.

Given that violent attacks on counsellors may be rare it could be said by safety managers that precautionary measures do not need to be taken (and proceed in culpable ignorance). However the counsellor may be involved with the assaulter, victims and ripple effect victims. The frequency and intensity of this type of casework on a counsellor's health must be considered when in some schools a counsellor may have three severe cases before lunchtime.

Even though the counsellor may not be assaulted, incidents of worrying phone calls at home and work, counsellors being followed, sexual harassment of female counsellors, defamation of counsellors is more likely.

If counsellors are seen as having the skills to negotiate potentially dangerous situations in schools, then this underlines the urgent need to set up worksafe and preventive safety procedures.

The argument that *You are trained for this work and that highly intensive and traumatic casework goes with the job, so why complain?* Is not an acceptable reason for workplace procedures not to be set up.

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[3] *Western Teacher*, Vol 23 No 9, Feb 1994

[4] B Star, *Patient Violence Therapist Safety*, p224, Social Work, March 1984

Some factors that are essential to effective, worksafe operation of a counselling service in schools are:-

Security

- A suitable records storage system to limit access and maintain confidentiality
- Restricted access to appointment books
- Security and privateness of counselling room so client feels safe
- After hours security, guarded patrols, surveillance, adequate lighting, escorts to carpark
- Discrete duress alarms, other workers to be informed of alarm procedures
- Counter and reception staff trained to identify and report agitated clients

Privacy

Privacy is a key requirement of counselling. Conversations inside an office are a constant source of distraction. Even where studies have shown that the noise levels are well below accepted tolerances, people still complain of being disturbed by conversations. It is not the loudness of the conversation - though loud talking is intrusive - but rather the content and interest value of the conversation and the proximity of the disturbance to those liable to be disturbed. Naturally, varying degrees of privacy are required by different levels of staff within an office.

Counselling involves active listening where hearing is important and frequent interruptions or where clients have to be asked to repeat statements, particularly with regard to telephone counselling, is a major cause of workplace stress.

Lack of consideration by other office workers such as loud talking, computer noise, radios playing and operating machinery can be a source of conflict between workers and can be upsetting to clients.

Noise Levels

Control of noise levels is another important factor in design of counselling rooms.

The Standards Association of Australia (1987) recommended sound levels at 40-45 db for interview and counselling rooms.

Working Alone

Quite often, the time and location of counselling work in schools may lead to the counsellor's working alone.

This situation creates a high risk set of hazards, some of which may be unrelated to criminal activity. For instance, if an injury occurs eg. Fall, heart attack, electric shock, there could be delays in getting assistance.

Attacks on school cleaning staff working after hours in deserted schools are examples of this dangerous situation.

A code of practice or plan to protect counsellors working alone in these circumstances needs to be implemented.

Relaxing Surroundings

RECEPTION CENTRE

Poor conditions (lack of signage, seating, poorly lit and ventilated, lack of toilet facilities, lack of thought to use of colour) often contribute to stress on counsellor and counsellee.

Clients may arrive for counselling more agitated and this may be the trigger for violence.

Receptionists can be trained to

- facilitate client flow, keeping to time, which then lessens time clients are on the premises.
- recognise stress or agitation in clients.

These are important phases in the assaultive behaviour cycle and can assist the counsellor in risk assessment of the interview.

OFFICE DESIGN AND FURNISHINGS

The following recommendations were made by Swandon & Scandid (1993)[5] concerning interview design:

- two external opening doors
- minimal furnishings
- desk/table fixed
- duress alarm
- staff doors open outward when exiting
- privacy bolts not fitted to staff side
- glass panel door if it is to be closed

Chairs are an important requirement of interview rooms. Chairs should be comfortable but sturdy. Collapsing chairs, chairs on rollers or with sharp edges can be a problem.

Thought should be given to use of colour and colour coordinated furnishings.

If the counselling room is in a high-set building then stair wells need to be well lit with non-slip surfaces on stairs. Carpets can reduce sound levels but need to be well laid otherwise tripping can occur.

Use of metal detectors maybe considered in high risk counselling centres.

Counselling Strategies for Counsellors

Lenore Meldrum[6] in an article on "Trauma in the Lives of Educators", stresses the need to develop support systems and strategies to be available to counselling staff working continuously with intense emotional experiences.

Professional supervision, time set aside for essential briefings (career information), debriefing and networking meetings are essential to the maintenance of a safe working environment given that career counsellors have a duty of care obligation to provide up to date reliable information.

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[5] *Were You Threatened at Work Today?* p94

[6] *Guidance & Information Bulletin*, 1994, pp 19-25

Risk Assessment

Risk Assessment for matters such as security and exposure to violent clients is a responsibility for school management and they need to ensure that preventive measures are then taken (violence response plan).

How are potentially violent clients anticipated? Star[7] mentions a compilation of studies which indicate violent clients tend to be younger, male schizophrenics, those with records of violence or those who feel they "may blow their top", or say they are buing a weapon.

For clients known to be drug users, have family dysfunction or grief, who have had trouble with the law or mental illness, risk assessment is an important issue in counselling.

Claims

The most common claim is under the **Workers' Compensation Act** in Queensland 1990. Stress related claims are referred to a tribunal of specialists (two specialist physicians and a psychiatrist) to interview and access medical reports.

Lengthy delays (up to nine months) can occur and while this goes on, the worker could experience further health complications.

Under **Common Law**, it appears that if an employer/manager has breached duty of care, where a risk assessment has indicated dangerous or unsafe work conditions may arise, and failed to take protective measures, a claimant may apply for compensation for aspects of individual loss, particularly future financial loss. It is the individual aspects of loss which constitute the main differences between workers' compensation claims.

If damage occurs where the counsellor cannot work again then **superannuation** should be considered.

Criminal Compensation Claims procedures are complex and may not be available to persons injured at work and such claims would only be considered after others have been explored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to advocate strongly for worksafe conditions in counselling. School counselling is an important job in schools and requires special attention in counsellor training, support and physical surroundings fi the task is to be performed competently and safely.

While schools and education generally are traditionally thought of as places of caring and safety, they are more complex and have experienced their fair share of violence in recent years.

From a management viewpoint, worksafe procedures and improved offices cost money and admission in incidents of occupational violence may reflect on current management procedures.

Recent reports endorse the importance of counselling in dealing with violent students and if this is to be pursued by management, then worksafe procedures in counselling need to be addressed as part of a corporate strategy.

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[7] *Patient Violence and Therapist Safety*, p227

Duty of care provisions of the Workplace Health and Safety Act encompass the training and competency of counsellors, providing accurate information and supervision. This is an area of counselling services in which there has been much recent change, discussion and debate.

Increases in common law claims and penalties under the Act point to preventative action being the best option beginning with positive management attitudes toward improvement and then counsellor-management consultation and implementation of the changes.

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